In Line with the Dhamma

October 7, 2011

One of Ajahn Suat’s favorite topics for a Dhamma talk was practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. And as he said, that was one of Ajahn Mun’s favorite topics as well. We’re here not to change the Dhamma to suit our own predilections, but we’re trying to change ourselves to be worthy of the Dhamma. After all, the Dhamma teaches the end of suffering, the total end of suffering. That sets a very high standard. The question for us is, do we want to follow that standard, or would we rather stick with our own everyday standards? And the follow-up question from that is, do you really love yourself? Do you really wish yourself well? One of the Buddha’s contemplations for someone who’s beginning to stray off the path and get discouraged is to reflect on the fact that you started on this path because you wanted to find an end to suffering. There was one point where that struck you as a really worthwhile goal. You were suffering enough that you wanted to find a way out. And as things get a little bit more comfortable, you may decide, “Well, this is good enough.” Or if the path starts to be discouraging, you say, “Well, maybe I can give up and try it some other time.” And the Buddha asks you to remind yourself, “Well, didn’t you come to put an end to suffering? And why are you going back to the pleasures and limitations that you rejected before? Is it because it’s really worthwhile? Is it really appropriate?” And the underlying question there, of course, is, do you really love yourself? Do you really wish yourself well? This is one of the reasons why we want to hold ourselves to a high standard. We’re not here just to get a little stress reduction or to relax a bit. We’re here to understand why the suffering keeps on happening and why we keep doing things that lead to suffering. What is it about those things that keeps pulling us back? Where is the allure? Where is the attraction? This is one of the reasons why we get the mind still, so we can really watch the mind in action, both in the process of getting itself still and in the process of keeping it still. When the Buddha talks about the aggregates, the question sometimes arises, “Well, where did he get the idea of the aggregates? Who would have thought of dividing things and experience up into form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness?” It wasn’t something that was in the culture. It was one of his more original ways of analyzing things. And if you watch your mind as you meditate, you begin to realize this is where he saw those things. Because when you get the mind to settle down, it requires that you, one, focus on the form of the body, try to give rise to a certain feeling of pleasure by holding on to a perception of the breath. And you notice that the way you perceive things really does make a difference. And the way you fabricate thoughts around that, it’s interesting to look at it as a process of fabrication. How do you put those thoughts together? And then there’s consciousness of all these things. So in other words, the aggregates come from watching the mind as it’s getting the mind to settle down. And then you watch it as you’re trying to keep it there, both to understand the process of what’s going on in keeping the mind in balance. And when the mind is really still and other thoughts come up, you can see the process, fabrication and perception very clearly. There’s a little stirring in the mind. And then you place a label on it. That’s a thought or that’s a physical sensation. This all happens at the borderline between mind and body. And sometimes a sensation just stays as that, as a physical sensation. Sometimes you interpret it as a thought, a potential thought world, and then you decide whether you want to go with it or not. There’s an intention in there. There’s a series of fabrications and perceptions that go back and forth. So you’re watching the process of the mind, both the process of getting the mind to be still and the potential for the mind to create other thought worlds that would pull you out of the stillness. So where’s the suffering in all this? As the Buddha said, there’s the clinging, the feeding off of these things. When he talked about the aggregates, he wasn’t trying to define what you are. All too often you hear that that’s the analysis. The Buddha says, “We are composed of five aggregates. That’s what our actual identity is.” But he said, “No, that’s not what you are.” He says, “Don’t even bother with that question of what are you.” Focus more on the question, “What are you doing?” Because it’s in the doing, it’s in the feeding, that we create suffering for ourselves. This means we have to change our feeding habits, which may be one of the reasons why a lot of people resist going deeper into the practice. It requires that you question the way you’re feeding, where you’re foraging for your happiness, where you’re foraging for your pleasure. And he’s asking that you recognize that this is one of the ways that you create suffering. Your pleasure may not just be in pleasant physical sensations or nice things. We pride ourselves on our way of relating to other people. We pride ourselves on all kinds of things. We find a lot of pleasure in that. We pride ourselves on our thinking abilities. We pride ourselves on our values. But if you learn to see all these things simply as perceptions and fabrications, you can begin to understand why there’s suffering in there, where it is that you’re actually feeding on these things, and where is the stress in the feeding. The whole purpose of this analysis is to give rise to a sense of disenchantment, to the point where you don’t want to feed that way anymore. One of the important ways of seeing that or inducing that sense of disenchantment is to realize that the way the mind processes things, the way it feeds on things, creates the food for more feeding. Now, if you think about that for a minute, the image is not all that good. You feed on what comes out the other side. It just keeps recycling through the tube over and over and over again. And when you can see a sense of the futility of all this, that it’s really going nowhere, you might be deciding, “Well, I’m ready for something better, something a little bit more demanding, that requires that you let go in a deeper way than you’ve ever let go before.” That’s when you’re beginning to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It also gives you the chance to see how good does it get, this end of suffering that the Buddha talks about, the release that he talks about as being the essence of the teaching. Exactly how free is that? You can’t really know unless you hold your practice to a high standard and are willing to examine some of the things that you cherish most deeply in your activities and activities of your thoughts, words, and deeds. It’s only then that you’ll see how really good it is to let go.

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